

Effective assessment plays a critical role in the learning process and has been called one of the most powerful tools in a teacher's arsenal (Marzano, 2006). While the word "test" often sends chills running down students' spines, it is necessary to administer assessments. Assessments serve many purposes; first, assessments allow teachers to improve their methods of instruction. By issuing frequent formative assessments, a teacher can determine where students need help, and if from year to year students consistently need extra instruction in the same area(s) then a good teacher should realize that his/her methods need some tweaking. Formative assessments are issued more frequently than summative assessments and are used to monitor and guide instruction while it is still in progress. These shorter assessments are generally in the form of quizzes, worksheets, questions, and homework assignments.

Second, there are many ways in which assessments impact student achievement. In order for this impact to be positive, assessment must be formative and frequent; must provide clear feedback; and should encourage students to improve. If all of these criteria are met, assessment can have a very positive impact on student achievement; however, if assessment is too frequent or too infrequent, provides little to no feedback, and if tips for improvement are unclear, it can have a negative impact on student achievement. Also, if students find little relation between course material and test questions, this may have a negative influence on their motivation. If a teacher were to use only summative assessments – which judge the success of instruction at its completion, are generally in the form of tests, final papers, or exams, and which provide a final grade or mark – students may become discouraged. Summative assessments are necessary for determining an overall understanding of a subject; however, it is best to supplement them with formative assessments as well.

Third, assessments function as a means to determine student placement. Diagnostic testing, given before instruction in a particular unit begins, allows a teacher to determine how he/she will teach, assess and evaluate a subject. If it becomes clear that much of the class has little prior knowledge on the unit, it may be necessary to do extra introductory lessons. If only a few students are struggling, it may be necessary to offer those students extra help at lunch time, during a study period, or to have them work with a more advanced peer. Assessments also help to determine if a student should be promoted or put on an SEP.

Before beginning a new unit, it is important to determine how the course content will be assessed. To ensure that the greatest number of students does well, it is essential that the teacher plan to use a combination of objective and subjective assessments, such as selected response items which tend to be objective and essay questions which are generally more subjective. It is important to use frequent formative assessments because these allow students to demonstrate knowledge more often and can help to increase self-efficacy by allowing them to perform well more often. It is important that assessments be challenging enough to warrant the effort put into them, but not so challenging that every student will do poorly. Frequent assessments which students are almost guaranteed to do well on will motivate students, as students will be less wary than they would be if they were tested on everything at the end of the unit.

Teachers must also remember that students generally fall into one of two categories - success-driven or failure-avoidant – and work to ensure that as many students are in the first category. In order to encourage students to work for success rather than simply trying to avoid failure, provide a choice when it comes to certain assessments, allowing students to be

assessed in a way which demonstrates their own learning skills. Projects and performances are a great way to do this – students can choose to write and perform a skit, to create a work of art, to write a short story, or any number of other projects. Such projects allow for scaffolding and encourage students to use higher levels of learning, such as analysis and synthesis.

Finally, as a teacher I hope to be able to take part in common assessments. Often used by professional learning communities (PLCs), common assessments are developed by a team of teachers based on a common curriculum and ensure that all students at a particular grade level are exposed to the same information and are assessed based on the same outcomes. When teachers work together to create a common curriculum and common assessments, their goal is to help more students achieve at higher levels, because at the end of the day, ensuring that our students are learning and achieving should be our main priority.